TUI T. SUTHERLAND

THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING SERIES

WINGS OF FIRE

WINGLETS #4 – RUNAWAY

WINGS OF FIRE

WINGLETS #4: RUNAWAY

by

TUI T. SUTHERLAND

SCHOLASTIC PRESS
NEW YORK

CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE

RUNAWAY

EXCLUSIVE EXCERPT FROM WINGS OF FIRE BOOK NINE: *TALONS OF POWER*

ALSO AVAILABLE

COPYRIGHT

Note: The events of this story take place immediately after the prologue of Wings of Fire: Legends: *Darkstalker*, thousands of years before the events of Wings of Fire Book One: *The Dragonet Prophecy.*

Snow speckled the black dragon's wings and shoulders. Small chunks of ice were caught between her claws, and she shook her talons to knock them loose before stepping into the tunnel. The smooth, curved channel led to a vast dome made of blocks of more ice, ice upon snow upon frozen ground.

But she wasn't cold.

Foeslayer touched the diamond earring in her ear.

An enchantment just for me.

A dragon who doesn't think I'm a total waste of space.

He'd gone in ahead of her, for the sake of appearances. Her eyes found him immediately as she entered the dome — even in the crowd of IceWings, he glittered the brightest. Not even his mother, Queen Diamond of the IceWings, could outshine him. Moon globes floating near the ceiling cast a cool, pale light that made the IceWings look polished and silvery, but turned the visiting black dragons dull and greenish.

Prince Arctic seemed to be listening raptly to his mother's lecture, but his gaze flickered to Foeslayer for a brief moment. A moment of *I see you.* A moment of *this is torture but I can survive it now that I've met you.* A moment of *you are the only other dragon in the world.*

It took her breath away. The NightWings in her own kingdom never took Foeslayer seriously. She was too scatterbrained, too likely to blurt whatever she was thinking. She got too passionate over things nobody else cared about — like the way visiting merchant RainWings or MudWings were sequestered from the NightWings instead of being invited to their parties and festivals. Her friends sniffed that it served the RainWings right for the exorbitant prices they charged for their fruit, and that MudWings weren't smart enough to be interesting anyway.

No one had ever looked at Foeslayer the way Arctic did — as though being different and a little weird was a good thing. As though it made her fascinating rather than annoying.

"Where have you been?" Her mother was suddenly there, blocking her view of Arctic, briskly brushing the snow off Foeslayer's scales. "You look frightful and you must be freezing. I told you the prince was coming! Didn't I say to stay put in your corner?"

"We're in a dome," Foeslayer pointed out. "It doesn't have corners."

Prudence narrowed her eyes at her daughter. "Foeslayer, don't be a toadstool right now. I don't need your smart mouth ruining everything." She flicked Foeslayer's ear with one of her claws, then stopped and peered at it sharply. Foeslayer winced in anticipation half a second before her mother's claws closed in, pinching the diamond and sending a burst of pain through all the nerves of Foeslayer's skull.

"*Where did this earring come from?*" Prudence snarled.

"Ow, ow, ow." Foeslayer tried to pull away but her mother forced her back into a crouch. "It was a gift, that's all, stop hurting me!"

Prudence let go suddenly with a hiss and jumped back, shaking her talon as though she'd been burned. Maybe she had — Foeslayer felt a glow of heat spreading from the earring. *It's enchanted to keep me safe from danger, too. Even from Mother.*

"You cannot *steal things* from the IceWings," Prudence hissed. "This is shocking even for you, Foeslayer."

"I didn't! An IceWing gave it to me!" Foeslayer protested.

"Which IceWing?" Prudence growled. "I told you not to talk to any IceWings!"

"Is everything all right here?"

Oh, it was bad, a bad, bad terrible thing that her heart leaped at the sound of his voice.

Too bad this earring isn't smart enough to protect me from my own heart.

Prudence whirled and found Arctic standing regally behind her, his eyes cold and unfriendly. He must have almost flown across the dome to get there so quickly. The IceWing queen and a small entourage of aristocrats were hurrying after him.

"Prince Arctic," Prudence said, drawing herself up to look as haughty as

he did. “This need not concern you. I am merely chastising my wayward daughter, who seems to have found and kept an earring that does not belong to her.” She held out her open talon to Foeslayer with a meaningful glare. “I will make sure she returns it immediately.”

“By no means,” said the prince. He intercepted Foeslayer’s arm as she reached for the earring and pressed it back down to her side. His scales were cool, like running water, and his talons squeezed hers lightly, almost imperceptibly: *I’m here for you.* “I gave her that earring as a token of the forthcoming alliance between our tribes. It would be inexpressibly rude to reject it.”

“We met outside,” Foeslayer explained to her mother’s disbelieving face. “By accident.” *Arctic, by all the moons, stop being so obvious. You’re going to get me killed.* Prudence wasn’t the only one who looked angry. Queen Diamond was within earshot now, and her suspicious eyes stabbed through Foeslayer like icicles.

“I am very sorry my daughter bothered you,” Prudence said to Arctic. “Foeslayer, return to our chambers at once.”

“Absolutely,” Foeslayer agreed, with immense relief. She would really like to be anywhere but here right this moment. She saw Arctic open his mouth to protest and shot him an extremely stern “shut up” look. “I’ll go right now.”

“That is what ‘at once’ means,” Prudence said. Her frown deepened as Foeslayer started to back away. “Don’t you need this?” she barked, holding up her arm. On her wrist glinted the silvery metal of one of the animus-touched bracelets.

The IceWings had three of these bracelets, each enchanted to protect a dragon from the cold temperatures and defensive weaponry of the Ice Kingdom. Because there were only three, visiting diplomatic parties were craftily kept small and outnumbered at every meeting. And they were also a handy way to remind outsiders about the power of the IceWings’ animus magic.

But Foeslayer was an unexpected fourth member of the party. She was supposedly there so her mother could keep an eye on her, although she suspected one of the real reasons was that Queen Vigilance wanted to force the IceWings to reveal that they had a fourth bracelet.

If they did, though, they hadn't produced it yet. So Foeslayer and her mother had to share one between them, meaning Foeslayer would be cold a lot.

Except now she had the earring.

But she couldn't admit that it was magic or what it could do or, most of all, who had enchanted it for her. For one thing, the IceWings had strict rules about animus magic. Prince Arctic was only supposed to use his magic once, in a ceremony to create a gift for his tribe. He certainly wasn't supposed to waste it on an unimportant, scatterbrained NightWing.

"Right," she said to her mother, pretending to shiver. "Yes, please."

"There are blankets in our rooms," Prudence said, dismissing her with a wing flick. "Use those and you'll be fine."

That was typical Mother: She'd act outraged that you didn't want something she was offering, and then as soon as you did want it (or pretended to want it), she'd say you couldn't have it.

Foeslayer couldn't stop herself from rolling her eyes behind Prudence's back. Arctic's gaze was still fixed on her, and she saw him crack a very small smile.

It wasn't quite small enough, though.

Over by the translucent ice wall, another IceWing was staring at them.

Uh-oh.

Her name came back to Foeslayer instantly: Snowflake. *That's Arctic's fiancée,* Foeslayer remembered. *The dragon he's supposed to marry.* The IceWing's expression was impossible to read.

He's taken. It was the first thing Foeslayer had learned about the prince, and yet she'd managed to forget it completely in the magic of meeting him (and in the actual literal magic of him enchanting an earring for her). *He's going to marry someone else.*

But he never could have been mine anyway.

She bowed, turned her back on all the IceWings, and ducked into the tunnel.

So why did I agree to meet him in secret later tonight?

Am I still going to?

A smart dragon wouldn't.

A smart dragon would keep her head down and make it home to the Night

Kingdom instead of risking an intertribal incident.

She stepped out into a blizzard that had quietly crept up on them, icy petals blocking out the sky and sea. Near the entrance, she could still see the impression in the snow where Arctic had been standing during their conversation.

Yes, but … that smart dragon sounds perfectly miserable.

All right. So what if I choose not to be smart? It's only one secret meeting. I just want to talk to him some more.

I mean, really, universe … what's the worst that could happen?

Snowflake had always suspected that the IceWing royal family was full of snobs, and now that they were here in her parents' palace, she was sure.

Queen Diamond said everything in a superior, condescending tone, peering down her snout as though your ignorance was a grave disappointment to her. She kept making snide comments about the state of the palace and how it could be improved. She never spoke to anyone below the First Circle, and she had clearly chosen Snowflake as her son's fiancée because she thought Snowflake was the quietest option.

(Snowflake knew this because the queen had said it directly to her face. "You're a dragon who knows how to keep her mouth shut," Diamond had mused, gripping Snowflake's chin in her talons to inspect her cheekbones. "Either you understand that I'm not interested in your opinions, or you don't have any, which would be preferable. I suppose I'll be able to tolerate your presence in my palace, so long as you make equally silent brats.")

Frankly, Snowflake had no desire to live in the main IceWing palace, but soon she'd have no choice.

The only time she'd ever been there she'd spent the entire visit in a whirl of tests, competitions, and yet more tests to prove she deserved her place in the First Circle of the IceWing hierarchy. It was infuriating, particularly since many of the tests had been subtle and deliberately unfair — secret traps set by the queen so she could assess Snowflake's strength, poise, diplomacy, and ability to come up with witty rejoinders whenever someone insulted her.

That last wasn't Snowflake's strength. She could do an excellent icy look of disdain, but all the cutting comebacks she should have said only came to her during the night, much too late, while she lay on her ice shelf, fuming.

The truth was she spent a lot of time fuming. It was a little surprising to her that Queen Diamond couldn't sense the rage under her scales. All those years practicing her cool exterior must have paid off. Her parents had certainly drilled it into her over and over again: *Freeze over your anger. Never let anyone see it. Nobody wants to hear about your feelings. Calm and collected on the outside; that's all that matters.*

She wasn't sure how long she could keep it up, though. Especially around her future husband, Prince Arctic, who was the most arrogant, entitled, patronizing, obnoxious, preening, fatheaded son of a walrus she'd ever met.

He acted as though she were barely Seventh Circle, as though she had an obligation to entertain him when he was bored, and as though she had no brains in her head whatsoever.

How can I possibly marry him?

How am I supposed to look at his SMUG PRETENTIOUS FACE every single day for the rest of my life?

How am I going to last even a month without stabbing my claws through his superior eyeballs?

It was supposed to be such an honor to marry into the royal family. Her parents were ecstatic that all their work on her had paid off. Such glories lay ahead! Her dragonets might inherit animus magic! Her daughters would be directly in line for the throne!

First in line to get killed by their horrible grandmother, that is.

But there was nothing Snowflake could do to change her fate. She obviously couldn't disobey her parents and her queen. She couldn't even hint to them that she might not be interested in their plan for her life. She had to be polite to Arctic and bow deeply to his mother; she had to wear the mask of the perfect daughter, apparently forever.

Forever. Until they store my frozen head on the wall of dead royal family members and slide my corpse into the cold ocean.

Forever trapped in the main palace with Arctic and Diamond.

Unless I can find a way out.

She drew back against the wall of the dome, watching Arctic's face as the loudmouthed NightWing left. She'd noticed the dazzled look in his eyes the moment he saw Foeslayer, and it was still there. He'd dismissed Snowflake, his moonsforsaken fiancée, as though she were an inconvenient dragonet

underfoot. And then — it must have been only moments later — he'd given Foeslayer his diamond earring.

His *earring*. Of all the sappy *nonsense*. Only characters in very bad, very sentimental scrolls did stuff like that.

He probably thinks he's very romantic.

With the WRONG DRAGON, you moron.

Not that she'd accept any jewelry from him if he offered. The rest of the tribe might find animus magic perfectly wonderful and useful, but Snowflake didn't trust anyone with that kind of power.

"My, my, my," said a voice that slithered like seals worming across a patch of ice. "Wasn't that an interesting interaction."

Snowflake swiveled her head around to face the approaching IceWing: female, slightly older than Snowflake, not from this palace, wearing a First Circle necklace. She was white with a scattering of gray-blue scales that looked like rippling shadows across her wings, and she moved like a confident predator.

Snowflake dipped her head in a polite half bow, wondering where their names each ranked on the wall and whether she should be bowing deeper. "Please accept my apologies, for I do not recognize your face," she said. "I hope I am not bringing great dishonor upon my family." That was one of the stock phrases she'd learned very young, designed to help dragonets wriggle out of awkward situations.

"No, we haven't met yet," said the new dragon, nodding back in a way that suggested her rank was higher. "I'm Snowfox."

Oh, thought Snowflake. *Queen Diamond's niece.* She'd certainly heard of this dragon, currently the only living heir to the IceWing throne.

Snowfox smiled, and tiny embedded gems glittered from her teeth. "Snowfox and Snowflake — we're either destined to be great friends or terrible enemies, aren't we? Let's avoid any confusion; you may call me Fox."

"Certainly, as long as you never call me Flake," Snowflake said, smiling back.

Fox laughed. "I'm sure you're anything but," she said. "It must take a very cunning dragon to ensnare the talons of Prince Arctic." Her dark blue eyes cut toward the remaining NightWings, her brows lifting innocently.

"I promise you, the only cunning dragon involved in this plan is the

queen," Snowflake answered, ignoring Fox's implication. "I take no credit for the match."

"Then true love with a handsome prince just fell into your talons?" Fox said slyly. "You must be the happiest dragon in the Ice Kingdom."

"I am so lucky," Snowflake agreed, letting the faintest whiff of sarcasm creep into her tone. "He's very … charming."

They both watched Arctic for a silent moment. Now that Foeslayer was gone, he had lapsed back into what appeared to be his usual sullen mood, grunting and scowling at everything anyone said to him.

"I'm sure there are many other dragons who would love to be in your scales," Fox said, shooting another sideways glance at the NightWing delegation.

"Naturally," Snowflake said. "Who wouldn't want to marry a prince and watch her daughters fight to the death for the throne?"

"Well," said Fox. "True love. Right?"

"Indeed," said Snowflake. "True love."

Arctic snatched the last bright green drink from a passing tray and stared into it gloomily.

"He's contemplating his noble reflection in the ice cubes," Snowflake observed.

Fox clapped her talons around her own snout, but couldn't hold back a snort so loud that several dragons turned to wrinkle their foreheads at her.

"Silvery moons," she said when she'd recovered the power of speech and everyone was ignoring them again. "You have a depth of dark water below your ice, don't you?"

"Only for my greatest friends … and most terrible enemies," Snowflake replied, meeting Fox's eyes.

"Now I'm quite sure which one I'd rather be." Fox tipped her head, calculating. After a long moment, she said, "Do you know what will happen if you *don't* end up having daughters with Prince Arctic?"

"I miss out on the tremendous fun of watching my mother-in-law rip them apart?" Snowflake guessed.

"That," said Fox. "Also, only one dragon is left to challenge Diamond for the throne."

Snowflake looked at her, realization dawning. "You."

Fox tipped her head down modestly. “Me.”

“It seems,” Snowflake said slowly, “that you and I have some mutual goals.”

“Isn’t it wonderful to meet a dragon who’s a kindred spirit?” Fox said. She draped her tail lightly over Snowflake’s and leaned a little closer, her odd looks tipping over into beautiful inside Snowflake’s mind.

A dragon who understands me, finally. A dragon as deep and dark as I am, who sees my anger and wants to be nearer to it instead of freezing it away.

“I have a few ideas … if you’re interested,” said Fox.

“Whatever you have to say,” Snowflake said, “I’ll always be listening.”

The two IceWings bent their heads together, whispering, as the gale built into a howling snowstorm outside.

Snow drifted through the window, gathering softly along the sill and feathering the floor. The sky outside was dark, and the silver flakes looked as if they were whirling up out of a deep abyss.

Prince Arctic stared into that abyss, thinking that it looked an awful lot like his future.

Pinned under Mother’s claws for the rest of my life. Unable to use my own magic after the gifting ceremony. Married to Snowflake, who hates me.

Never seeing Foeslayer again.

How could he bear it?

How could this be all he’d ever have of happiness — nine days of secret meetings, and then nothing more for the rest of his life?

Snowflake had become more unfriendly with each passing day, responding to him with the barest minimum of chilly conversation. It was almost like someone — the great ice dragon, the universe, whoever — wanted to make it very clear how different Snowflake and Foeslayer were.

Because Foeslayer … she was sunlight and all the moons and the whole star-filled sky. He’d met her only nine days ago but already she was the beginning and end of his universe. She made him laugh — had anyone else ever done that? She made him want to be warm. She made him brave and careless; she made him forget about circles and walls and protocol and ranks and rules.

She made him a dragon he actually wanted to be.

But she was leaving.

The day after tomorrow, the NightWings would be escorted over the Great Ice Cliff and their protective bracelets would be removed. Foeslayer would fly south and out of his life, while Arctic flew north with his mother and the royal guard. Home to the main palace, to prepare for his gifting ceremony.

Tonight would be the second-to-last time he'd be able to sneak off and see her alone. Tonight, tomorrow night, and then never again.

It had been difficult to find a safe time to meet. The NightWings normally slept all day, while the IceWings slept at night, like normal dragons. But for the purposes of this visit, the NightWings had shifted their schedule over, waking in the late afternoon so they could negotiate with the queen and dine with her court in the evenings, and then going to bed in the early morning when it was still dark outside. So there was a small window of time when everyone (except the night watch guards) was asleep, and that was when Arctic and Foeslayer met, in the stolen moments before dawn.

Arctic brushed a tiny pile of snow into his talons and stared at it, thinking of how snowflakes like these melted when they touched Foeslayer's scales.

A strange feeling crept over him … a crawling sensation between his wings … a sense of being watched.

He whirled around.

His mother stood in the doorway, filling the frame like a glacier that had swept in from the mountains, crushing everything in its path. Ice-blue diamonds cascaded from her ears and around her neck and all along her tail band, but none of them glittered as sharply or as dangerously as her eyes.

Arctic wanted to ask how long she'd been standing there, but of course, instead, he bowed deeply. He imagined Foeslayer yelping, "Official creepiest queen in Pyrrhia!" and was glad he had a moment with his head down so he could compose his face.

"Ssssson," Diamond hissed. "Why are you awake at this hour?"

Arctic arranged his wings and head in the approved talking-to-the-queen position. "I couldn't sleep, Your Majesty." *Why are YOU awake? Are you spying on me? Do you know something?*

"That sounds very undisciplined," she rumbled, her gaze traveling around the room. "The tribe has strict sleep schedules for a reason. If you have been

disrupting yours — as I suspected after I caught you yawning during our breakfast with Snowflake and her parents — then I will assign a chronologer to fix you."

"With gratitude and respect," Arctic said, feeling absolutely none of either, "may I humbly observe that my trouble sleeping seems likely to be related to my gifting ceremony, and therefore is sure to be temporary."

"I didn't lose sleep over *my* gifting ceremony." Diamond slithered across the floor toward him, her claws leaving furrows in the ice. "Which strain of weakness plagues you? Cowardice? Indecision? Wild fantasies of making different choices?"

That last one was a little too close to the truth. Arctic held his eyes steady; his expression unreadable; his answer, silence.

"A true IceWing would not have any such troubles," Diamond said. She loomed over him as though she could read guilt in each of his scales. "I've told you what your gift should be. Obey without question, and you have nothing to fear. Then you will sleep like a loyal IceWing — deeply, and at the appropriate assigned times."

Arctic didn't trust himself to speak. His mind echoed with the sound of Foeslayer laughing, two nights ago, as he playfully wrapped a curtain around her snout to muffle the noise. She'd pushed him away, giggling, and freed herself.

"Seriously, explain this so it actually makes sense," she'd said. "Your mother wants you to make a what?"

"A bowl of ice — or a moon globe, or a mirror would be acceptable — that much I'm allowed to decide, apparently."

"With the power to … ?"

"… predict the weather," he'd admitted.

"That's it?"

"Well — to predict it pretty far in advance, mind you. At least a year ahead."

"Um, I *can predict your weather a year in advance. It's going to … wait for it … oh, this is pretty shocking … it's going to SNOW! And then a couple of days later … you're not going to believe it … snow again! And then, wait, this one's a bit tricky … hang on to your tails, everyone … it looks like we're in for about three hundred and sixty-five more days of … great moons! MORE*

SNOW!”

“Stop making me laugh! I’m going to end up with weird little laugh wrinkles around my eyes and no one in the Ice Kingdom will know what they are.”

“I like your weird little laugh wrinkles.”

“I like your weird little way you mispronounce words.”

“I BEG your pardon. YOU’RE the one who says things all squonkily.”

“That’s not a word at all. And incidentally, sometimes our snow comes in the form of a raging terrible blizzard, which would be quite useful to know about ahead of time, thank you very much.”

“But come on*,” Foeslayer had said, rolling her eyes. “How can she call that a ‘gift of vision’? Is there anything less visionary you could do with your powers? Don’t listen to her, Arctic. It’s your magic. Make something completely wonderful with it.”*

“Yeah?” he’d said. “Like what?”

“Well — if you really want a ‘gift of vision,’ why not have it show more of the future than the weather? Like, who the next queen of the SkyWings is going to be, or how the dispute along the Great Five-Tail River will be resolved, or where the best veins of silver and diamond mines can be found? You could make it see the future or answer any question you ask it or show you any dragon on the continent or literally ANYTHING more interesting than the weather.”

Arctic had stared at her.

“Ooo, I love that face,” she’d said. “That’s your ‘I wish I’d thought of that!’ face! I know you do. Don’t feel bad; I’m just way smarter than you.”

“You aggravating moonhead —”

“Here’s the thing, though,” she’d interrupted him — no one interrupted him! “Don’t actually do that, because if you enchant it to see the future or answer any question, then the queen will be able to find out who kills her to become the next queen. And I’m pretty sure she’ll straight-up murder that granddaughter in her egg.” She’d hesitated. “Your daughter,” she’d added softly.

Arctic’s imaginary future as a father having dragonets with Snowflake had never felt less real, less possible.

“Do you have any other ideas for animus gifts?” he’d asked.

“Only about eighty million!” she’d said. “Do you want to hear them all? Feel free to take notes in case your brain gets tired.”

“Listen, NightWing, don’t you know you’re not supposed to talk to princes that way?”

“I think there’s a lot of things we’re both doing right now that we’re not supposed to,” she’d pointed out, sweeping her wing around the alcove where they were hiding.

“Like falling in love?” he’d asked, taking her talons in his.

“Now that,” she’d whispered back, “is something you’re definitely, absolutely not supposed to say.”

“Arctic!” Queen Diamond barked.

He jumped, and realized with a rush of terror that he hadn’t been holding his expression still while the memory washed over him. What had Diamond seen in his face in that unguarded moment? Could she guess what it meant?

“I asked you a question,” she said, her voice brimming with outrage.

Oh, worse and worse. “My deepest apologies,” he said, bowing low again. “Perhaps I am more tired than I thought and should go to sleep at once.”

“Answer it first,” she snapped. “Do you swear to give the tribe the gift of vision as I described it to you?”

He hesitated. It was dangerous and unheard of to contradict her — his parent and his queen — but if he lied and said yes, she’d be even more furious when he disobeyed her at the gifting ceremony itself.

“I have another idea,” he said cautiously. “I was hoping to discuss it with you. Perhaps in the morning?” He had to get rid of her. Foeslayer must be in their spot by now, waiting. She’d wonder why he wasn’t there.

She wouldn’t come looking for me here, would she? he thought with another bolt of fear. She was just bold enough and reckless enough to make such a mistake. And if Diamond saw a NightWing appear in her son’s doorway in the middle of the night … someone wouldn’t survive till dawn.

“Another idea?” said the queen. “One of your own? I don’t like the sound of that. Very well, you may present it to me first thing in the morning.”

She stalked toward the hall as Arctic breathed a stifled sigh of relief. In a moment she’d be gone, and then he could run to Foeslayer, warn her, and send her flying back to her room as fast as possible.

Queen Diamond stopped in the doorway and gave Arctic a merciless,

piercing look. “To make sure that you *do* sleep,” she said, “and that you wake at the precisely correct time in order to attend our appointment, I will leave these two guards here inside your door.” She flicked her tail out into the hall, and two large IceWing soldiers slipped inside. Big, burly, stone-faced. Not to be argued with, bribed, or tricked. A wall of indestructible ice between him and Foeslayer.

“That’s not —” Arctic started, then bit back the rest of his sentence as his mother hissed at him.

“In fact,” she spat, “since you are so overwhelmed by this animus gift decision, it seems best for you to stay in seclusion until it is time for the ceremony. Clearly something here has been distracting you, but we won’t let that be a problem anymore.”

Arctic’s heart fell, spinning away into the abyss with the snow.

“Obedience,” Queen Diamond said. “Discipline. Order. Strength. And knowing your place. These are the hallmarks of a true IceWing. Don’t you ever forget it again, Arctic.”

She swept away, leaving Arctic cut off from the dragon he loved forever.

Snowflake felt Fox’s tail curl around hers, their spikes clicking together.

“Did you hear all that?” Fox whispered.

It was windy and snowy on the balcony across from Arctic’s room, but always deserted after dark, and a perfect spot to keep an eye on his movements all night. They’d been watching him sneak off to meet with Foeslayer every night at about this time, but seeing the queen sweep through like a blizzard was a shock.

“How did she know?” Snowflake whispered back. “If her plan for him works, then ours is ruined.”

“We won’t let that happen,” Fox said, squeezing Snowflake’s talon. “You will never have to marry him. I swear by the eggs that hatched the world.” She shook the snow off her snout and glanced across at Arctic’s shadowy door. “Maybe we were thinking too small anyway. If they were caught together, yes, there would be a scandal, and he would be dishonored, and your parents might let you back out of the marriage. But they might not — they might cover it up somehow. He’s still an animus, which makes him valuable, even if Diamond has to kill a quartet of NightWings to clean up his mess.”

She tapped her chin thoughtfully.

"We need him out of the kingdom," Snowflake suggested. "Or dead. Otherwise someone else will marry him and have dragonets. I haven't forgotten that we're here to solve your problem, too."

"Yours first," said Fox. "Yours is more urgent. I can deal with dragonets later if I have to."

Snowflake smiled and brushed a stray ice crystal from Fox's cheek. Fox hadn't approached Snowflake looking for an ally. Fox had been hoping to sow discord and mistrust between Snowflake and Arctic for her own purposes.

But everything was different now that they knew each other. Fox wanted to protect Snowflake with a fierceness that matched Snowflake's own desire to get Fox on the throne.

A dragon I would do anything for. That's something I never thought I'd see.

"Out of the kingdom," Fox echoed suddenly. "Do you think … is he stupid enough to run away with her?"

"If he's not," Snowflake said, "can we *make* him that stupid?"

"He'd have to use his magic to get past those two guards," said Fox.

"And to get her safely away from here," said Snowflake. "Would he risk his soul that way?"

"Risk his soul *and* break the IceWings' strictest rule about animus power. He's a rule follower. I haven't seen any sign of secret courage in him before."

"Neither have I. And for something like this … he'd have to break a lot of rules."

Fox flicked her wings back. "He'd have to be desperate."

What would make me desperate? Snowflake thought for a moment, then said slowly, "He'd have to think she was in danger."

"Yes," Fox breathed.

"I can do that," Snowflake said. "Queen Diamond will let me visit him tomorrow, even if no one else can. I'll hint to him that the queen is displeased with the turn the negotiations have taken."

"He'll believe that," Fox observed, "because it's true. Those NightWings are as arrogant as Diamond. It's almost funny to see which side can stick their snouts higher in the air."

"Yes, this proposed alliance was never going to work." Snowflake

hunched her wings against a gust of wind. “I could have told them that from the beginning.”

“So when he hears that the queen is angry with them …”

“Then I’ll hint that the queen might have other, deadlier plans for the NightWings … especially for one of them.”

“And he’ll believe *that*,” said Fox, “because Diamond was acting like she knew all about his secret romance tonight. Whether she really does know or not, he’ll find it easy to imagine that she might kill his dear moon-eyed truly beloved out of vengeance or spite.”

“Or to make sure she’s out of his life forever.” Snowflake nodded. “It will be almost too easy to slip those worries into his mind after tonight.”

“You’re brilliant,” said Fox, tossing her wings wide and spinning on the balcony, letting the snow whirl around her. “And meanwhile, I’ll spread a rumor among the guards that something strange might be happening tomorrow night. If they see Arctic trying to escape with the NightWings, he won’t be able to change his mind and slither back. He’ll have to keep flying.”

“Don’t let Queen Diamond find out, though,” Snowflake said. “She needs to sleep through it, or else she could use her magic to stop them.”

“No fear,” said Fox. “She’ll miss the whole thing. In fact, I might have a sleeping potion I bought from a RainWing once that could be useful …”

“*You’re* brilliant,” said Snowflake.

“I hope the guards won’t be cowards,” Fox said, looking out at the whirling snowflakes. “I want to make sure Arctic doesn’t get past us without a fight.”

“I want to be there, too,” said Snowflake. “I want to see his face when he realizes he’s not the great ice dragon’s gift to the world after all. When he discovers we’ve outsmarted him.”

“And if something goes wrong,” said Fox, making an innocently sad face, “and he doesn’t make it … or they both don’t make it …”

“Well,” said Snowflake, “that wouldn’t be the end of the world either.”

Snow, endless snow, snow as far as the edge of the universe, snow forever; snow in her nose and between her claws and melting into her scales and sticking to her talons and weighing down her wings; snow on the rooftops, burying the palace, covering the world; snow everywhere, always falling,

always underfoot, always sneaking through the windows and under the blankets and WHY WAS THERE SO MUCH MOON-SPLATTING SNOW?

"I hate this kingdom," Foeslayer offered, pacing up and down the small room again.

"Really," said Prudence drily. She was rolling blankets and packing their belongings, preparing for their departure in the morning. "That's surprising. You've been acting obnoxiously cheerful since we got here."

"I … liked being away from court," Foeslayer said. "But I don't know how anyone can *live* like this. I bet having snow in their faces all the time is what makes them so grumpy. Their boring landscapes and no fire anywhere and creepy floating lights. I bet it turns them *all* into total jerks."

Prudence gave her a strange look and Foeslayer realized she should probably shut up.

But he *was* a jerk. How could he not show up, when he knew she was leaving? Had all his pretty sparkly words been lies? Did he always flirt with strange dragons who visited his kingdom and then drop them without saying good-bye?

I know it had to be good-bye. But couldn't we at least have that?

And then he hadn't appeared at any of the final farewell gatherings or the last feast. Foeslayer's mother thought he was snubbing them, "typical IceWing prince." Foeslayer had worried that he was sick, or that something terrible had happened.

But then she managed to casually fly by his window, and he was in there, looking JUST FINE, eating little fish cakes with SNOWFLAKE. Like he'd already forgotten about her. Like he could just go back to normal and carry on with his life, as though nothing had happened at all.

JUST FINE.

Her pacing slowed for a moment, and she reached up to touch her earring. But *this* was real. He'd broken the rules and used his magic and risked his soul for her. So it all had to be real, didn't it?

Arrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrgh.

"Foeslayer, you are driving me mad," said Prudence. "Either sit in a corner and read or help me pack. If I hear your claws squeaking back and forth on the ice one more time, I'll remove —"

Prudence abruptly fell silent.

Foeslayer turned from the window to look at her.

The older NightWing stood frozen, her mouth open as if she might continue the sentence any moment. Her eyes were blank, her talons unmoving. She held a blanket half-folded in her claws.

"Mother?" Foeslayer said, approaching her. "Are you all right?" She poked her mother's wing and got no reaction. "Mother?"

"Sorry," said a voice behind her.

Foeslayer whirled and found Arctic's head sticking out of the wall. She let out a little shriek before she could stop herself.

"She'll be all right," Arctic said. His shoulders, wings, and front talons slipped through the wall, followed by the rest of him. "I did it to the guards in my room, too. It'll wear off in a few hours, once we're far enough away." He held up a tiny dagger with a smile. "Isn't that funny? Mother trusted our rules so much she left two ordinary dragons to guard an animus. As if I couldn't make myself a cool magic thing to get out of there. As if I wouldn't *dare*."

"You just walked through a wall!" Foeslayer cried.

"Oh," said Arctic, tapping one of his armbands. "That's only a little spell. It can do this, too." He turned it clockwise around his arm and vanished into thin air.

"Whoa," said Foeslayer. She reached out toward the space where he'd been and felt invisible talons clasp hers.

"Now you are, too," he whispered. She looked down and realized with a shiver that she couldn't see herself anymore.

"That's a lot of magic," she said, glancing over at Prudence. "You shouldn't have wasted your magic just to come say good-bye to me. I mean, I'm glad you did, but —"

"I'm not saying good-bye," he said. "I refuse to say good-bye to you."

Foeslayer's traitorous heart leaped. "But you have to," she said.

"*No.*" He became visible again, turning the armband back the other way. "I don't want to live without you. Foeslayer, let's run away together. We can find an island to hide on! Or maybe the stories of the lost continent are true … We must be able to find somewhere we can be safe, and, more importantly, be together."

Can we? Could it really be possible?

"What about your mother's magic?" she asked. "She'll be so furious —

what if she decides to use it? Won't she be able to find us anywhere we go?"

"I have magic, too," he said. "I can hide us from her. You don't have to be afraid." He reached out and touched Foeslayer's earring gently with one claw. "As long as she is wearing it, I enchant this earring to forever keep Foeslayer safe from any enchantment Diamond might cast."

How could I not fall in love with a dragon who wraps all his magic in his love for me?

Maybe they could do it. Maybe they could escape and be happy, secretly, just the two of them, far away from their overbearing mothers and stifling royal courts.

It was so tempting … except …

Foeslayer looked over at the scowling statue of Prudence. She wasn't a great mother, but she was still *her* mother.

"If we run away," Foeslayer said, "your mother will kill mine, and the other two NightWings as well. She'll think I convinced you to run off with me and she'll blame them. If she can't reach me, she'll need a target for her anger, and they'll be right here, in her claws."

"So I'll give them protection spells, too," Arctic said, sounding frustrated. He lifted one shoulder in a careless shrug.

"No, save your magic," Foeslayer said, although what she really meant was *save your soul.* "We have to take them with us. We escape, all of us, right now."

"Take them with us?" Arctic said, recoiling a little. "I wasn't exactly picturing your mother in our secret romantic hideout."

Foeslayer brushed his wing with hers. "We don't have to go looking for an island that might not exist and then be fugitives forever. Come to the Night Kingdom. They might be a little mad with me at first, but my tribe will protect you. *I* will protect you."

Arctic let out a little snort that made her bristle. Didn't he think she could protect him? Maybe she didn't have magic, but she was one of the strongest fighters in her class. There were different ways to take care of someone.

"But I'll be the only IceWing there," he said. "And you all sleep in the daytime and live in canyons and who knows what other weird stuff."

"You'll adjust," Foeslayer said, rolling her eyes. "It's a great kingdom; you'll see. And we can get used to anything as long as we're together, right?

That's what's important?"

"Yeeeess," he said, a little more reluctantly than she would have liked.

"So it's settled. We'll all fly back to the Night Kingdom tonight," she said.

He hesitated, glancing out at the falling snow.

"Arctic … I can't leave them here to die," she said, waving her wing at Prudence. "I'm not that kind of dragon."

Arctic sighed heavily. He pointed the dagger at Prudence and hissed, "Unfreeze."

"— them and give them to the library as quills," Prudence finished. Her mouth caught up to her eyes, and her jaw dropped at the sight of the IceWing prince standing in her room, his tail twined with Foeslayer's.

"What —" she sputtered. "This — what are you —?"

"There's no time to argue, Mother," Foeslayer said, lifting her chin. "Prince Arctic and I have fallen in love, and he's coming back to the Night Kingdom with us. But that means we have to leave right now."

"Foeslayer!" Prudence exploded. "This is exactly the kind of brainless catastrophe I should have expected from you! But worse! You cannot steal the prince of the IceWings!"

"I'm not stealing him!" Foeslayer protested. "It was his idea! He wants to come with us!"

"More or less," Arctic muttered. "NightWing," he snapped as Prudence opened her mouth again. "You can't stop us. Either you come with us now or I freeze you again, and you can explain all this to my mother in the morning." He brandished the dagger, wagging the tip back and forth.

Muscles clenched all through Prudence's face, as though she were fighting back several waves of rage.

"Fine," she spat suddenly. "I'll get Starclaws and Discretion."

Foeslayer couldn't believe it. She'd expected much more yelling, disapproval, and abuse before her mother gave in. *Maybe there's a small part of her that does want me to be happy,* she thought hopefully.

"I'll scout ahead and freeze any guards in our way," Arctic said. He darted into the hall, leaving Prudence and Foeslayer alone.

"Thank you, Mother," Foeslayer said fervently. "I didn't mean for this to happen, but we just fell in love and he's so wonderful and you'll love him

once you get to know him —”

“I knew you were being an idiot,” Prudence snapped. “But I let it go on because I hoped you might be enough of an idiot to go home and have his eggs. By then we’d be far enough away that the IceWing queen didn’t have to know, and with any luck we’d end up with animus dragons of our own.”

Foeslayer faltered. “You … you knew?”

“Of course I knew.” Prudence snarled softly. “Why do you think I brought you in the first place? You’re the only NightWing in the tribe who would do something this idiotic, and I had a feeling you’d catch the prince’s eye. But I didn’t think *he* was as big an idiot as you are. I thought *he* had some loyalty to his tribe. Some sense of right and wrong. Young dragons are so useless.” She stepped toward the door, then spun back to glare at Foeslayer. “All I can say is you’d better have dragonets fast, Foeslayer. As many as possible, so our tribe can inherit animus magic and make this whole disaster worthwhile.”

Her mother hurried away toward the rooms of the other two NightWings.

I thought I was doing this great, daring, magical, romantic thing … but instead I was walking straight into one of my mother’s traps.

Shock reverberated along Foeslayer’s wings. She felt as though she’d been dropped into the iciest part of the ocean.

I can never tell Arctic. If he thought we ensnared him deliberately … he’d never believe I didn’t know. He’d never forgive me.

The IceWing prince slipped back into the room, grinning now from ear to ear. “Coast is clear,” he whispered. “I froze the eight guards I found between here and the closest balcony.” He flipped the dagger between his claws. “So this is what it feels like to unshackle my power,” he said with a laugh. “No wonder the tribe doesn’t allow it. I feel so *free*.”

“Don’t let yourself get too free, though,” Foeslayer said. His grin faded and she whisked over to throw her wings around him. “No, keep smiling. I know you’re doing all this for me. It’ll all be worth it. Together forever, Arctic! We’re going to be the happiest dragons in the world.”

“We are,” he said, holding her close. “But first we have to get out of here.”

In the hall they found the other NightWings waiting. Starclaws and Discretion looked a little dazed, but they came along quietly, all of them following Arctic as he slipped stealthily through the dark corridors.

Foeslayer's heart twitched with fear when she saw a shape loom up ahead, but it turned out to be one of the frozen guards, staring straight ahead into space. They crept past seven more of them, each IceWing immobile, no longer a threat.

Finally they reached a balcony that faced south, with nothing but open sky and empty land stretching ahead of them, all the way to the dark shadow of the Great Ice Cliff that crossed the horizon.

They stopped on the threshold and Foeslayer saw Arctic take a deep breath. She reached out and wound her tail around his reassuringly.

Please don't change your mind, she prayed. *Don't make me go home alone after this.*

He looked at her, and with her night vision she could see that his expression was unsure. He had imagined a daring flight with only her, an escape from everything they hated. He hadn't imagined giving himself to the NightWings — exchanging one disapproving tribe for another.

"Well, *I'm* going," Prudence said abruptly. "I have no intention of dying for Foeslayer's mistakes." She pushed past Foeslayer and Arctic and launched herself off the edge. Starclaws and Discretion leaped after her.

"Together," Foeslayer said to Arctic.

"Forever," he said slowly.

"Halt! Stop right there!" Six IceWing guards came plummeting out of the night sky, all with diamond-tipped spears strapped to their backs.

"Let's go," Foeslayer cried. She seized Arctic's talons and dragged him off the balcony. Their wings tangled for a moment, and then they righted themselves, beating furiously as they lifted away. Foeslayer felt the rush of wind swoop past as the IceWings missed them, twisted in the air, and gave chase.

"Prince Arctic?" one of the guards called, confusion weaving through his voice.

For a moment, Arctic faltered beside Foeslayer. "I know that guard," he said when she tugged him forward again. "He was my trainer — he taught me everything I know about weapons."

"It's the NightWings!" screamed a voice from the parapet above them. "They're stealing our prince! *Stop them!*"

Foeslayer glanced back and saw two more IceWings launch themselves

from the parapet. The one that was shouting had odd shadowy scales rippling across her pure-white wings, and the other — no, that couldn't be Snowflake, could it?

Whoever it was, the guards were listening. Their wingbeats got stronger, more powerful, and they all drew weapons.

"Keep flying," Foeslayer said breathlessly, pushing Arctic forward. An arrow shot by her snout, barely missing her ear.

"Leave us alone!" Arctic shouted at the guards. "Go back! Let us go!"

Another arrow nearly nicked Foeslayer's wing and she yelped with fear. *The earring will protect me*, she reminded herself, trying to calm her racing heart. *It won't let them hurt me. Just keep flying, Arctic. We just have to stay ahead of them.*

"Stop shooting at her!" Arctic roared.

"We'll save you, Prince Arctic!" called the voice of his teacher.

This time it was a small hail of arrows, but they swerved around Foeslayer's scales.

"I'm all right," she shouted. "Arctic, just keep flying!"

Perhaps Arctic didn't hear her or perhaps he'd forgotten about the earring's protection or perhaps he was too upset by the sight of Foeslayer in danger to think clearly.

Whatever made him do it, Arctic spun in the air, flung his wings open, thrust his front talons toward the pursuing guards, and shouted, "Spears! Stop those guards!"

Foeslayer grabbed his arm in horror. "Arctic, no!"

But it was too late. The spears snapped free — out of the guards' claws or off their backs — pivoted, and stabbed into the IceWings' chests.

"No, wait!" Arctic yelled. "Don't kill them!" He shook his talons frantically and tried to point at the guards again. "Don't kill them! Just stop them, that's all I meant! Leave them alive!"

It was too late. One by one, the six IceWings fell from the sky, dropping like the rocks Foeslayer used to throw into the deepest canyons of the Night Kingdom.

"No!" Arctic cried. "Go back and leave them alive! I take it back!" He turned to Foeslayer, clutching her arms desperately. "I didn't mean to! I just wanted them to leave us alone!"

“I know,” she said. “I know, I know, Arctic, but we have to keep flying. You can’t go back now. And those other two are still right behind us.”

The two from the wall had caught up to the spot where the IceWings fell, and Foeslayer realized with relief that neither of them had weapons on them — nothing they could attack with, nothing they could be hurt by.

“What did you do?” one of them yelled. She flew toward them and Foeslayer saw that it really was Snowflake, after all. *Why is she even awake? How did she happen to be there as we escaped?*

“You monster!” Snowflake cried, diving at Arctic. “I knew those dragons! How could you just *kill* them? For a *NightWing*? What is *wrong with you*?” She slashed her talons at his snout, but Foeslayer jumped in the way and shoved her back.

“I was going to let you have him,” Snowflake shouted at her. “But he doesn’t deserve to live! He doesn’t deserve to be happy!”

She flew at Arctic again. Foeslayer shot a blast of fire to drive her back — at least, that was what she intended to do.

But at the same moment, she saw Arctic lift his claws, as though he were catching her fireball in his talons, and then shoved it forcefully toward Snowflake.

Fire caught all along one of Snowflake’s wings.

At first, Foeslayer thought Snowflake’s scream was echoing in her own mind, before she realized the other IceWing was screaming, too. Snowflake’s companion plummeted down to catch Snowflake before she could fall to the ground. Frostbreath shot from her mouth, extinguishing the flames, but leaving a trail of blackened marks. Snowflake howled with pain, clutching at her friend as her injured wing flailed uselessly.

“Oh, Arctic,” Foeslayer said, her voice catching in her throat. “We have to go. Let’s go. Come on, just keep flying. Don’t look back.”

She dragged him along with her, forcing him to fly. The unfamiliar IceWing started yelling curses after them.

“I’ll never forgive you for this!” she roared. “I’ll kill every last NightWing if I get a chance! You’ll wake up one day with my claws in your eyes! I’m going to wipe out your whole tribe and leave you until last so you’ll know their deaths are *all your fault*!”

“Did I kill her?” Arctic asked hoarsely.

“No,” said Foeslayer. “Snowflake was hurt, but I’m sure she’s still alive.” *She may never fly again … but he doesn’t need to know that.*

They flew in silence until they found Prudence waiting near the Great Ice Cliff.

“I suppose you need this to get across,” she said gruffly to Foeslayer, holding up one of the enchanted bracelets that had gotten them safely into the kingdom in the first place.

Foeslayer felt a pang of guilt. *We might not be stealing their prince, but we are stealing their “gift of diplomacy.” Will they ever trust another tribe in their kingdom again?*

She thought of the falling, dying guards. *I thought we could escape without anyone getting hurt.*

But the IceWings will hate us forever for this.

“Thank you for waiting, Mother,” she said. She touched her earring. “But this will get me across safely.”

Prudence squinted at the earring, then threw a sharp look at Arctic. Foeslayer could almost read her mind. She was thinking that if the prince was willing to use his magic like that, maybe he could be convinced to do something useful for the NightWings as well.

Foeslayer felt her throat closing with dread. Poor Arctic, flying right into the tribe’s web.

But they’d still be together. That would make up for whatever any other dragons did to them, or how hard life might be … wouldn’t it?

They soared over the cliff and joined the other two NightWings on the far side. Together they flew south, dipping into the dark clouds that were gathering up ahead.

Foeslayer and Arctic flew near the back, close together, but he didn’t say anything for a long, long time.

Foeslayer risked a glance at Arctic’s face. He looked as though he’d been stabbed through the heart himself.

“Are you … all right?” she asked.

“Obviously not,” he snapped back.

She blinked. “I mean — I know you’re upset. But I meant, how does your soul feel? Is it OK?”

“My soul is none of your concern,” he hissed.

“Um, yes, it is,” Foeslayer retorted. “If I’m going to marry you, your soul is very much my concern.”

Arctic let out a growl and turned his head away from her.

At the same moment, Prudence turned to glance back at them, and the look on her face was so smug that Foeslayer wished she could claw it right off.

You think you know everything about me and Arctic, Mother. You think we’re already falling apart and you’re so pleased with yourself. You can’t wait to say I told you so *to me every day for the rest of my life.*

But I love Arctic. I do, and that’s real. I’m going to make this marriage work. I’m going to make him keep loving me, and I’m not going to let him get away with acting like a jerk. I’m going to hang on to his soul. I’m going to make him happy. We are going to be happy.

Maybe this isn’t exactly the fate either of us expected. But it’s ours now.

Me and Arctic.

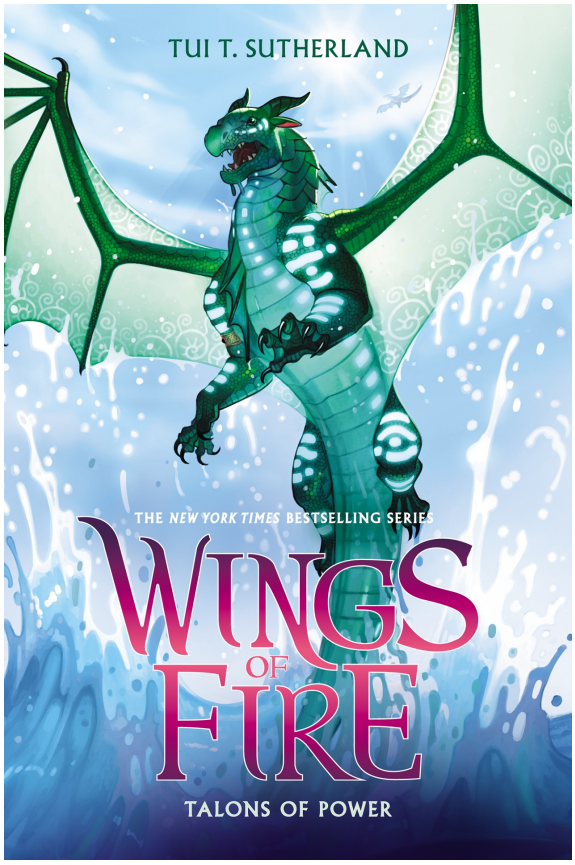
Together against the world.

Forever.

Keep reading for a sneak peek of

WINGS OF FIRE

BOOK NINE:
TALONS OF POWER



The nightmare rose out of the mountain, vast and glittering.

Turtle had never seen a dragon so large; he'd never seen eyes so sharp. He knew instantly that this dragon could and would happily kill him in a heartbeat.

Terror pounded through him like waves in a storm, building higher and higher.

I need to hide. I need to hide.

He desperately wanted to disappear, to vanish into the dark sky as if he'd never been there. He wished he could melt away like a camouflaged RainWing.

Why did I ever let anyone notice me? I'd be safe if I'd stayed boring and forgettable. This is what happens — when someone sees you, soon everyone will see you.

And one day that "everyone" will include a dragon who wants to kill you.

He couldn't have explained how he was so sure. Darkstalker was smiling at the dragonets below him. In fact, he looked absolutely delighted, not particularly murderous.

And yet — as his eyes darted past Turtle, Turtle thought he saw a flash of hatred there, deep and fierce.

For some reason, this legendary dragon, the most powerful NightWing who'd ever lived, loathed Turtle with all his heart. Turtle was sure of it.

He's going to kill me the first chance he gets.

This wasn't how he'd expected his story to end.

Turtle had always loved stories. He loved histories and animus tales and stories of war, of skyfaring pirates or enchanted treasure, of scavengers who could speak the language of dragons, of lost tribes in faraway lands.

But his favorite stories were about heroes — especially the ones in the scrolls his mother wrote. Since she was so busy with running the kingdom, writing her scrolls, and protecting her heirs, Queen Coral didn't have much time or interest to spare for any of her thirty-two sons. Reading her stories was as close as Turtle could ever get to her.

He loved scrolls about brave dragons who saved the day and stopped the forces of evil. One of his favorites was about a dragon named Indigo, who'd rescued the entire tribe from a deranged killer. Another starred an insignificant gardener named Droplet, who'd discovered a secret invasion of MudWings and fought them off before they found the hidden palaces.

The more Turtle read these stories, the more he imagined a story of his own: a story where Turtle was the hero.

A story where Turtle battled squadrons of SkyWings and storms of SandWings all on his own. A story where Turtle stood at the gates of the palace and swung his spear in ferocious arcs, stabbing their enemies, as strong as a whale, while his older brothers and the rest of the tribe cowered inside.

A story that ended with his parents cheering and hugging him. And then his mother would write a scroll that was all about *him.*

Turtle the Strong and Mighty
Turtle: A Tale of a Hero Heroically Doing Hero-Type Things
How Turtle Saved the Entire Kingdom with His Awesomeness

Sometimes, when Turtle had a moment alone, or when he wasn't paying attention in class, he would secretly write pieces of this story on scraps of slate he kept hidden in his room. He dreamed that one day he'd have a whole manuscript to show his mother, and then she might say, "Oh, son, I know one of my daughters will run the kingdom eventually — but you are the true heir I've been waiting for: the next writer in the family."

A hero or a writer. Or both, why not? That would be Turtle's place in the world.

But then, too soon and disguised in a confusing shape, his chance came. His one opportunity to save the day and be a hero in his parents' eyes — but he didn't even know it until it was over, and he'd failed.

He failed, and they hated him, and he'd never get that chance again.

That night when he'd failed to find Snapper and save his unhatched

sisters, Turtle destroyed every bit of writing he'd ever done and swore he would never write again. He'd stop dreaming; he'd stop imagining that a useless dragon like him could ever save the day or make something wonderful.

He wasn't the hero, and he wasn't the storyteller. He was the idiot who fell over his claws in the first chapter, had to be rescued in the fourth, nearly ruined the whole plan in the ninth, and ran away at the end, or died, if he was really extra stupid.

So he hid his one power and stayed exactly where he was supposed to: under the surface of the water, in the middle of his pack of brothers. Ordinary, unmemorable. A dragon nobody would expect anything from, and so nobody could ever be disappointed by him again.

And that had worked for quite a long time, until he made the mistake of caring about some other dragons and trying to do a couple of little things to help them, and where did that lead him?

Right to the feet of the most terrifying dragon the world had ever known.

This is the part where I die pointlessly. The one who gets sacrificed so the real heroes can get on with saving the day.

His wings were shaking so hard he couldn't stay in the air. He dropped down beside Moon and Qibli, clutching the ground with his talons. Winter and Peril were still hovering in the sky, their wings beating, silver and gold flashing in the moonlight.

I need to hide, Turtle thought. But how could anyone hide from the most dangerous dragon in the world — a mind reader, an animus, *and* a seer who knew the future?

He can't read my *mind, though.* Turtle's gaze dropped to the three remaining skyfire stones in his armband, which shielded him from mind readers. Maybe he had a millisecond to do something, anything, before Darkstalker foresaw it and stopped him.

He scrabbled his talons along the ground, keeping his eyes on the towering NightWing. His claws closed around something small and rough — a broken stick from one of the trees that had fallen when the mountain cracked open.

Hide me, Turtle thought at it frantically. *Hide me from Darkstalker.*

Darkstalker stretched his vast wings and grinned at Peril. "Ah, that's

infinitely better," he said. "Nice to finally meet you, Peril. Thank you so much for your help."

Peril roared furiously and threw herself at him, claws outstretched and flames blazing from her mouth.

"Peril!" Moon shrieked as fire engulfed Darkstalker's face.

"Oh, no, no, no," Darkstalker said, waving away the smoke. He pressed one of his front talons into Peril's chest and held her at arm's length while she struggled and tried to bite him. "Peril, very brave, but tsk-tsk. First of all, I'm your friend, although I realize you're new to that whole concept. Second of all, invulnerable scales over here! Didn't you know that? Surely that detail came up at some point in the great scary legend of Darkstalker. There's nothing you can do to me, little firescales. So settle down and let's start over."

Peril fell back, breathing heavily and brushing at her scales where Darkstalker had touched her. The smoke rising from her wings twisted into the thin clouds in the sky overhead.

Turtle's heart was still pounding. Darkstalker turned toward Moon, and his eyes went right past Turtle as though the SeaWing prince was not there. But Turtle still didn't feel safe, not completely hidden, not yet.

Darkstalker paused with a slight frown. "Weren't there … more of you?" he asked, touching his temple. "Wasn't there someone I particularly wanted to see?"

Moon glanced around, confused.

"Particularly wanted to see" — *does he mean ME? I need a better spell,* Turtle thought in a panic. He gripped the stick harder. *As long as this stick is near me or touching me, I enchant it to hide my entire existence from Darkstalker. That means he cannot see me or hear me; he cannot remember that he's ever heard of me; he cannot hear about me in other people's minds or conversations; and he cannot see me anywhere in his futures. I enchant this stick to completely erase the dragon holding it from Darkstalker's awareness.*

The furrow disappeared from Darkstalker's forehead. "Moon!" he cried, beaming at her. "We're finally meeting! Isn't this amazing? Wow, you're a lot smaller than I thought you'd be."

"That's you, actually," Qibli said, finally finding his voice. "You're … a lot bigger than you probably remember."

Darkstalker looked down at the ground, held out his talons, and flicked his massive tail, knocking a shower of boulders down the slope. He wasn't really as big as the entire mountain, although it had seemed that way to Turtle at first. But he was at least three times as big as the biggest full-grown dragons Turtle had ever seen.

"I really am," Darkstalker said, delighted. "Two thousand years of slowly growing. I must be the hugest dragon that ever lived. Also the oldest — by all the shining moons, I'm *ancient*, aren't I?"

"Beware the darkness of dragons," Moon said, taking a step back. "Beware the stalker of dreams …"

"Oh, that's not me!" Darkstalker said. "Moon, come on, you know that. I don't slither about in the dreams of other dragons, apart from fixing your nightmares. I'm guessing that part of the prophecy was about Queen Scarlet, who, you might remember, was chock-full of darkness. On the other talon, 'something is coming to shake the earth' — that's totally me! Watch this." He stomped one foot on the ground so hard that tremors shuddered out in all directions. Turtle stumbled, and the closest small tree fell over.

Darkstalker grinned at Moon. "Pretty impressive, right?" He paused, thinking. "I guess being this big is the upside of being alive for two thousand years, even if I slept through it all. BY THE CLAW-SHAPED MOONS, I am SO HUNGRY. Does anyone have any food?"

"How did you get out?" Winter demanded.

The look Darkstalker shot at Winter was as unfriendly as the one he'd given Turtle. *He doesn't like IceWings either,* Turtle realized.

But Darkstalker's answer was cordial. "Oh, that was all Peril here," he said, tapping the SkyWing on the head. Peril's blue eyes were blinking fast and her claws kept clenching and unclenching.

"When she set my scroll on fire," Darkstalker explained, "all my magic returned to me, so I could use it to free myself. Wasn't that kind of her?"

Peril's wings slumped. She looked as though she'd just rescued a baby dragonet from a trap only to watch it immediately get eaten by a great white shark.

Turtle wished he could make her feel better. He wanted to fly up and tell her this wasn't her fault, but his wings were still shaking too hard for him to take off. Also, he hadn't completely convinced himself that the magic was

working. What if Darkstalker could see him, after all? He didn't want to draw the NightWing's attention, just in case.

"Wait," Moon said. "That means — you *lied* to me." She unfurled her wings and pointed at Darkstalker. "You told me to destroy the scroll if it looked like it would fall into evil talons. You made it sound like then you'd be trapped forever, but it would be worth it to protect everyone else. But you *wanted* me to destroy the scroll all along. You *knew* that would send your power back to you! You were tricking me!"

"Yes, that's true," said Darkstalker, "but lucky for me that I did, right? Otherwise you might never have freed me. Not very kind, Moon. I'd say I did the right thing." He looked at her without a smile for the first time, his eyes odd and glittering.

"You called us friends," Moon said in a low voice. "You shouldn't trick your friends."

"Yes, well, you also shouldn't leave your friends trapped under a mountain for the rest of their immortal lives," Darkstalker said briskly. "Good *point*, Darkstalker. Listen, I can't even talk anymore, I'm so hungry. Let's all catch something to eat and then you can show me around Jade Mountain! There are some dragons there I can't *wait* to meet." He lifted off into the air, then turned to beckon at Moon. "Come on, Moon! I just want to have friends again, to use my voice, to hunt and fly. Can't we save the 'oh, no, but you're so sinister and evil' talon-wringing for later? What do you say — give me a chance?"

Moon glanced at Qibli, looking torn.

"*I'm* not going with you," Peril said. "You're not the queen of me!"

"Me neither," said Winter. "The IceWings have legends about you. We know what you did to us. And I don't take orders from —"

"I'm not ordering you to do anything, Prince Winter," Darkstalker said, turning to look at Winter. The IceWing fell silent. "But I think you know that those old legends don't tell the whole truth. You know that a dragon should not be judged by what other dragons say about him. And the more time you spend with me, the more I think you'll find that I'm really an absolutely wonderful dragon." He smiled with all his teeth.

Winter touched his temples for a moment, then stared at Darkstalker with something new in his blue eyes.

“You’re right,” he said. “Let’s start over.”

“Winter?” Qibli said sharply. He darted into the sky and up beside Winter, brushing the silver dragon’s wings with his own. “Are you all right?”

“Of course,” said Winter. He tipped his head toward Darkstalker. “I am trying not to judge dragons too quickly anymore. Let’s hear him out.”

“That doesn’t sound like the Winter I know,” Qibli said to Moon. “Does this seem weird to you?”

“You don’t know me *that* well,” Winter objected, snorting a tiny cloud of ice crystals. “Dragons can change! *I’ve* changed. Maybe he has, too.”

“Without question,” Darkstalker said, nodding. “I’ve had a lot of time to think about my mistakes.”

Qibli backed away from them, worry spilling across his face. “Moon …” he said carefully, as though he were reaching for the only island in a vast, empty sea. She flew up beside him, ducking her head to look into Winter’s eyes.

“Did you do something to him?” Moon asked Darkstalker.

“Of course I didn’t!” Darkstalker protested, and, “No! He didn’t!” cried Winter at the same time.

“Darkstalker,” Moon said. “You have to promise me — you cannot put spells on my friends.”

“I’m *really* offended by this,” Winter said haughtily. “I’m *such* an open-minded dragon.”

Peril and Qibli snorted in unison.

“Moon,” Darkstalker said reasonably. “I wouldn’t waste my animus magic — and my soul — on some tiny hush-up-an-IceWing spell. I mean, seriously. Don’t you remember the whole point of my scroll? That *I* made?”

“To keep your soul safe,” Moon said hesitantly. She swooped around Winter, studying him. “But —”

“Stop worrying so much!” Darkstalker nudged her with one of his giant wings. “Boy, you remind me of someone I used to know. Can’t you be excited for me? This is a great day! Let’s go celebrate! Tell you what, I promise if I feel the need to use animus magic, I’ll let you know.”

“And you promise not to hurt my friends?” Moon asked.

Darkstalker sighed gustily, sending a hurricane of leaves swirling around Turtle’s feet. “*I’m* hurt that you even need to ask me that,” he said. “But of

course. If it makes you feel better, I promise that these three are officially the safest dragons in Pyrrhia." He waved his talons at Qibli, Winter, and Peril.

Moon opened her mouth, then closed it. She and Qibli simultaneously looked down at Turtle.

Turtle crouched lower, pressing his underbelly into the ground, and shook his head at them.

"Let's hunt now, as Darkstalker suggests," Qibli said, nudging Moon, "and figure out what to do next after that." He shot a significant glance at Turtle.

Oh no. That glance had a meaning, a message. Qibli was expecting Turtle to do something, and Turtle had a bad feeling that "something" wasn't "Turtle flying all the way back to the Kingdom of the Sea, finding a deep trench, and staying there forever." A queasy, tense feeling started bubbling through Turtle's stomach.

"Good idea," said Winter.

Moon nodded, and then *she* gave Turtle a meaningful look, too.

By all the moons, what did they think he was going to do? Attack Darkstalker, like Peril had? Obviously that wouldn't work. If Peril couldn't hurt him, Turtle certainly wouldn't be able to.

Did they want him to hide them as well? He winced. He should have thought of that sooner. A good friend, a better dragon — a hero — would have thought to protect everyone instead of just hiding himself. *But they all wanted to talk to Darkstalker, didn't they? I just wanted to hide. That's what I always do.*

As the dragons flew away, veering southwest, Qibli twisted in a spiral, looked at Turtle again, and flicked his tail in the direction of Jade Mountain.

Oh, Turtle realized. *They want me to go warn the school.*

I can probably do that without messing it up.

I think.

For a moment, Peril hovered mutinously in the sky behind them, and then she swooped down to Turtle.

"Aren't you coming, too?" she asked. "Don't we all have to follow his grand mighty lordship SinisterFace?"

Turtle shook his head and held out the stick. "He can't see me," he whispered. "I hid myself from him."

Peril's face lit up. "Of course!" she said. "That's awesome! You have animus magic! *You* can kill him!"

"Oh," said Turtle, flustered. "No, I — I don't really — kill anyone." A brief flash of scales and blood darted through his mind, and when he looked down, he saw his claws curling dangerously. He jumped and shook them out until they looked like his own talons again. "That's not my thing," he said, tamping down a wave of panic.

"I know, I know, it's my thing," Peril said, "but I *can't* kill him, because of his *stupid* magic, GROWL. So you have to. Don't worry, it's not that hard, and it would be such a relief — for me, I mean — because I'm having this feeling — I don't know what to call it, but it's kind of big and heavy and annoying? And it's filling me all up inside like everything is awful and it's all my fault? Like maybe all the bad things in the world are my fault? I really don't like it, so if you can make it stop, that would be the greatest."

"I think what you're describing is what we call guilt," said Turtle, "but it's not your fault he tricked us. I still think you did the right thing, burning the scroll."

"Well, thanks, but the universe disagrees with you," Peril said, jerking her head at the enormous crack in the side of the mountain.

"Peril!" called one of the dragons in the distance.

"Good luck," Peril whispered. "Make it something really cool, like his insides exploding. Or his face falling off. I'm kidding! I'm a little bit kidding. I mean, insides exploding would be pretty cool, right? Never mind, it's up to you! Destroy him and save the world! Three moons, I wish I could do it!" She took off and flashed away, fast as a firework.

Turtle shivered.

Save the world?

That's not my thing either. I would definitely mess it up. That's way, way too much pressure.

I'm clearly not a hero.

He raised his eyes to the shadowy peaks of Jade Mountain.

But I know where I can find some.

BOOK ONE
THE DRAGONET PROPHECY

BOOK TWO
THE LOST HEIR

BOOK THREE
THE HIDDEN KINGDOM

BOOK FOUR
THE DARK SECRET

BOOK FIVE
THE BRIGHTEST NIGHT

BOOK SIX
MOON RISING

BOOK SEVEN
WINTER TURNING

BOOK EIGHT
ESCAPING PERIL

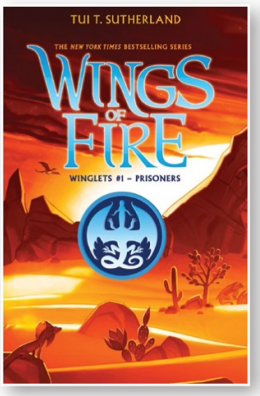
BOOK NINE
TALONS OF POWER

LEGENDS
DARKSTALKER

Read the

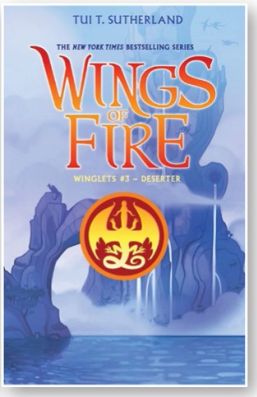
WINGS OF FIRE

WINGLETS Series

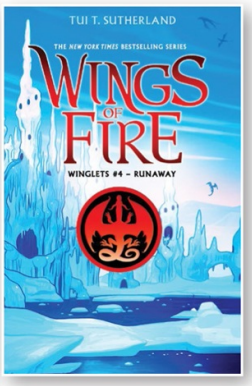


#1: PRISONERS

#2: ASSASSIN



#3: DESERTER



#4: RUNAWAY

Every dragon in Pyrrhia has a secret... until now.

Available wherever ebooks are sold!

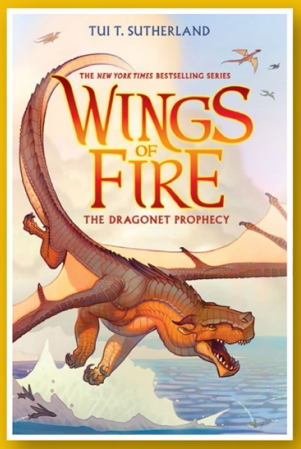
SCHOLASTIC

scholastic.com/wingsoffire

SCHOLASTIC and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

WINGLETS4e

An epic series takes flight!



Read them all!

SCHOLASTIC

scholastic.com/wingsoffire

Available in print and eBook editions

SCHOLASTIC and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

WINGS8e

Three dragons. One Destiny.

Discover the first-ever special edition of the
New York Times bestselling Wings of Fire series!

SCHOLASTIC

scholastic.com/wingsoffire

SCHOLASTIC and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

WINGSSE1e

Text copyright © 2016 by Tui T. Sutherland
Border design © 2016 by Mike Schley
Illustrations © 2016 by Joy Ang
Design by Phil Falco

All rights reserved. Published by Scholastic Press, an imprint of Scholastic Inc., *Publishers since 1920*. SCHOLASTIC, SCHOLASTIC PRESS, and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. No part of this publication may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereafter invented, without the express written permission of the publisher. For information regarding permission, write to Scholastic Inc., Attention: Permissions Department, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

First edition, October 2016

e-ISBN 978-0-545-95779-3